

## Wells College History Major

### 2015 Assessment

#### **Executive Statement.**

During 2014-15 the HIST major continued to exist in a holding pattern, waiting for a new administration to arrive. A recent retirement and a faculty resignation have reduced the major to two full-time tenured faculty members and a part-time adjunct. In addition, in Spring 2015 one of our full-time professors was on sabbatical leave, so the history major was left with only one full time professor and three courses taught by two adjuncts (with varying success). The loss of two full time positions has notably constrained the ability of the major to provide a rich historical curriculum for our major and many related areas (Education and Women's and Gender Studies in particular). The HIST major currently has multiple needs across both time (e.g., coverage of ancient, medieval, and modern periods) and geographical space (specifically, coverage of "non-western" areas). Coursework on regions such as East Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East is particularly urgent. Over the past couple of semesters we have been fortunate enough to have hired an adjunct to teach a course or two each term on an *ad hoc* basis, but practically we will not be able to sustain the HIST major as it is now configured with the current level of faculty staffing. During this interim period, the administration has not considered replacing one or both of our full-time position despite our grave needs. Hence, uncertainties about prospects for replacement have made it difficult to engage in comprehensive long- term planning at this particular moment. We are hopeful that with the new president arriving, the future hiring prospects of the history major will become clearer. Once we have a sense of growth or not, we will better understand how to re-think our curriculum so that we can best serve the needs of history majors, the Sustainable Community curriculum, related areas, and the campus as a whole.

#### **II. Summary of Meetings.**

A. With one professor on sabbatical in the spring, no history major meetings took place on assessment or any other matter. But during Fall 2014 the two full-time faculty frequently discussed these issues informally—although frankly, we were more concerned by the huge gaps in our curriculum and how to fill them.

B. However, in an effort to better monitor our student learning outcomes, we have begun to make some changes.

First, we have instituted a portfolio system. And in Fall of 2015-16 the history faculty will have the first opportunity to discuss and review the portfolios from 2014-15, observe what they reveal, and talk with students about their value. We are determined to find a way to gather and record the information made visible in the portfolios for assessment purposes.

Second, four years ago we brought back written comprehensive exams—in part to gauge how successfully we are meeting our goals and objectives for student learning. So far the results have been extremely gratifying. In almost every case the essays demonstrate their deeper understanding of historical thinking, a recognition of the knotty issues of interpretation, an improved ability to think critically and evaluate evidence and arguments, and significantly improved prose. A number of students have said how much they appreciated being required to do the comps, because it made them stop and review their entire history career at Wells—leading them to reflect more seriously about their education as a whole. Yet, for assessment purposes, the history faculty needs to systematize the information about the improvements that we have observed.

Third, in an effort to improve students' oral and written skills, one history professor has been experimenting with a new pedagogy related to "gaming" called Reacting to the Past, that requires students to take on historical roles, give many speeches, collaborate and strategize with others, participate daily in debates, write position papers and reflective essays. The four games already played at Wells have had some success—and students participating in the Enlightenment and French Revolution games have seemed to enjoy this demanding experience as well as improving their abilities in many areas. But, as with all classroom practices now, we need to be able to assess their actual effectiveness. The national Institute at Barnard College is helping practitioners develop grading rubrics and assessment tools for the games. Other history faculty have expressed some interest in the pedagogy as well. We hope to continue to offer at least one or two games per semester, so that more students can see if this experience works for them.

C. In short, we in History plan to work on developing a thorough and systematic Assessment Plan with specific statements (related to our mission statement and program goals), including Goals, Objectives, Outcomes, How Measured, Measurement Tool, Success, etc. for the various exercises our students complete (including senior thesis, senior comps, internships, and more typical papers and exams). We also plan to bring in our adjunct into the conversation for advice, input, and information from his courses and assignments as well.

**III. Summary.** The History Major is somewhat behind on documenting the formal process of assessment, although we are constantly assessing our students' performance in myriad ways. *We are determined to improve this situation in the upcoming year.* In August we again will have two full time professors back on campus, so we can begin more productive conversations about assessment, choose a

coordinator, assign tasks and develop an action plan. Once we make those decisions, I will be sure to update EPC on these specifics for the upcoming year.

Below you will find our Mission Statement and Program Goals that we intend to revisit and revise as seems necessary. Our revised Program Goals will be incorporated into assessment grids and tables (as suggested in the model) for future reference. That should make this process easier for everyone in the future.

### **Mission Statement for the History Major.**

A cornerstone of a liberal arts education, history is the study of continuity and change over time. The history major at Wells College helps students acquire an understanding of the richness, diversity, and complexity of the human experience over time and space. As students examine historical questions, they learn how historians have approached and interpreted the past, they gain an appreciation of the contested nature of historical knowledge, and they engage issues that raise ethical questions and provoke historical debate. Students learn to think critically and creatively, as they interpret historical evidence and construct well-reasoned arguments.

### **Program Goals of the History Major**

The HIST major trains students to:

- Think historically by cultivating a sense of change and continuity over time.
- Recognize connections between the past and the present and locate both self and others in time and space.
- Develop an appreciation of difference and diversity by cultivating a sense of shared human experience across time and space.
- Gain knowledge of the past and develop analytical skills that encourage students to become well informed, critical, and active citizens capable of exercising sound judgment.

- Understand historiography and the constructed/interpretative nature of historical scholarship
- Understand the value of conceptual analytical categories such as class, race, gender and ethnicity in historical scholarship.
- Gain a general familiarity with the intellectual, political, economic, social, and cultural history of the United States, Europe, and at least one “Non-Western” area.
- Read critically and evaluate primary and secondary sources.
- Develop research skills that allow students to access, critically evaluate, and use information effectively in composing well-reasoned historical arguments and interpretations
- Develop writing skills.
- Develop oral presentation skills.

## **Outcomes**

HIST Students will demonstrate:

- General competence and critical understanding of key events and turning points in the historical areas studied.
  - Understanding of the interpretative nature of historical enterprise.
  - Ability to think rationally, critically, and analytically about important issues.
  - Proficiency in active critical reading, research, and writing skills necessary in historical study.
- Ability to identify and analyze both primary and secondary sources, and cite them correctly in their written work.
- Ability to work both independently and collaboratively on particular problems or questions.
- Proficiency in preparing and delivering clear and well-reasoned oral presentations.

## Assessment of Outcomes

Student performance is measured in a variety of ways:

- **Examinations, quizzes, and spontaneous written responses** demonstrate analytical and critical thinking skills and students' mastery of the concepts.
- **Informal writing exercises, reading reflections, and discussion questions** generated by students demonstrate students' engagement with assignments and active critical reading.
- **Position papers, short critical responses, medium-length interpretive essays, and research papers** demonstrate ability to critically evaluate source materials, analyze historical problems, answer historiographical questions, and construct logical arguments.
- **Classroom activities** (e.g., debates, group work, role-playing exercises, and simulations) demonstrate students' ability to understand the significance of historical events, ideas, and personages by assuming various roles or positions.
- **Formal oral presentations and class discussions** demonstrate verbal skills and competence and students' ability to communicate and synthesize material.
- Student performance in **internships** in museums, historical societies, archives, libraries, and schools.
- Student success in **History 375, "Writing History: Theory and Practice."** Required of all history majors and minors, the course trains students to understand history as a discipline and learn the contested nature of history and historical interpretation through the following:
  - An introduction to the methodological problems involved in historical research, criticism, and writing, including the technical issues involved in producing a research paper.
  - A survey that examines the ways the historical profession has evolved over time and connects those changes to the social, political, cultural, and economic contexts of the larger society at particular moments.
  - A critical reflection about the nature of historical enterprise (e.g., How do historians know what they know? What is an historical fact? What counts as evidence? How objective can we be? Can we make moral judgments about the past? What is the function of historical periodization and historical categories? What does it mean when historians disagree about the same evidence?)

- An introduction to various approaches to the past and to different types of historical writings (e.g., economic, social, cultural or political approaches to the past, the relation between history and myth, history and literature, history and social sciences).
- Training in the practical issues of research and writing such as defining a topic, organizing material, making arguments, and using evidence. By sharing rough drafts and engaging in peer-editing, students work collaboratively toward creating more polished and more effective essays.
- Senior Experience
  - **HIST 401. Senior Essay:** Senior majors demonstrate skills in addressing historical questions, identifying and accessing sources, conducting research, critically evaluating primary and secondary skills, constructing arguments, and composing original interpretations in a senior thesis of approximately 30-40 pp. in length. [Fall semester]
  - **HIST 402. Senior Seminar:** Senior majors meet regularly with HIST faculty and fellow thesis writers to share ideas, discuss problems, learn about proper citation formats and bibliography, make preliminary presentations, and evaluate students' work through peer-editing. [Fall semester]
  - Seniors present their thesis research in a **formal presentation** to the Wells College Community. [Spring semester]
  - Seniors complete a written **comprehensive examination** at the end of the spring semester.

### **Use of Assessment Data**

The history faculty (including our adjunct who is now beginning his second year with us) will meet at least once each semester to evaluate the following:

- Effectiveness of the current major; what we need to address
- Effectiveness of lower-level courses in preparing students for advanced work in the major.
- Student performance in upper-level seminars and senior theses to determine how well students have been prepared and supported in their capstone projects.
- Effectiveness of the senior experience (i.e., senior thesis, senior seminar, public presentations, and comprehensive exam)
- Consideration of goals, means of assessment, and new strategies (e.g., student portfolios, tracking of student careers after graduation) • Course and staffing needs.

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